

IN-FORUM

Agriculture secretary comes to State Fair to listen, take notes
Associated Press - 07/27/2005

MINOT, N.D. (AP) - Federal Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns came to the North Dakota State Fair to listen to farmers, and they were pleased to see him taking notes as they talked about the need for crop insurance reform and stable prices.

On a stage with samples of corn, sunflowers and other crops nearby, Johanns told hundreds gathered at the fairgrounds Tuesday that he came to hear comments on federal farm legislation. He said he plans to visit Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin and California next month.

"I came to this forum with an open mind," Johanns told farmers. "This is not my time, it's your time. I'm going to listen."

Allen Lund, a rancher from Selfridge, took a swipe at the recent move to reopen the border to Canadian cattle imports.

"Take care of the U.S. ranchers first and the foreign cattle producers second," he told Johanns.

Paul Berntson, a farmer from Adams, said he drove 180 miles to let Johanns know that he would like to see incentives to pass farmland to future generations.

"I want to be able to retire without giving my retirement away," Berntson said.

"He's writing stuff down," Berntson said, after seeing Johanns taking notes. "I don't know if he's fooling us or not."

"This is good. I hope he takes it to heart," said Ralph Birdsall, a farmer from Berthold.

Paul Thomas, a second-year farmer from Velva, said he would like to see crop insurance changes.

"There's a huge outlying risk there," he said. "If I'd have had a bad year last year, I probably wouldn't be farming now."

Aaron Walsh, of Harvey, a North Dakota State University student who served as a state FFA officer during the past year, said he would like to see stable grain prices.

"I would love to have an opportunity to farm, but I've also been running the numbers through my head, and sometimes they don't come out in the black," Walsh said.

He also said farmers are losing the chance to farm thousands of acres of land that have been converted to the Conservation Reserve Program or wildlife uses.

"The government has done a lot for farmers but if it could do more, that would be excellent," he said.

Birdsall said many of the comments sounded familiar.

"By golly, these young farmers are saying the same thing we said 46 years ago," he said.

State Agriculture Commissioner Roger Johnson said the 2002 federal farm law should be a first draft of the next farm bill. He called for limits on farm program payments to restore public confidence, saying many people see no need for farm programs that allow "billions of dollars going to giant multinational companies."

Johnson also said changes are needed in crop insurance programs to deal with losses in quality.

Earlier, Johanns flew over fields in counties damaged by flooding. Farmers have been hoping for disaster relief.

Johanns made no specific commitments but said, "anytime I can get on site, it's very helpful."

Louie Arnold of Esmond said the government should help farmers pay increased fuel and fertilizer costs. He estimated those costs at as much as \$60,000 in the past year for his operation.

"I don't think we producers should have to foot the whole burden," he said.

Arnold said government officials may be trying to use the next federal farm bill to get out of farming all together, but he said that won't work.

"The government has been in too long to get out," Arnold said.

